



Chefs cook up culinary delights in 24hr challenge

Reporter: Peter Lewis

First Published: 12/09/2005

KERRY LONERGAN: Sean Murphy with that look at wine judging. Now, one of the greatly admired skills in the bush is the ability to put on a feast with little notice and sometimes with limited ingredients. Our next story features some of the best young chefs in the world displaying such skills at what's called the 'Black Box Cookoff' on the Gold Coast. The black box contained the limited ingredients and the task was to prepare a four-course masterpiece for 500 people and they had just 24 hours to create mouth-watering magic.

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: It's not just the competition per se, but at the end also we have to serve this food, and we have to guarantee that the quality and the presentation of food comes out

PETER LEWIS: Welcome to the pressure cooker world of an international culinary competition. Generally chefs enjoy a reputation for volatility matched only by dynamite, so a real-time battle of wits between precociously talented egotists from across the culinary and cultural spectrum might well be a recipe for disaster, right?

COMPETITOR: Mamma mia!

PETER LEWIS: Or wrong? If this event is anything to go by, pressure also makes diamonds. The loud-mouthed bullies were weeded out in the elimination rounds, leaving a field of "snags" - sensitive new age gastronomes - to fight out the final. In fact, you barely heard anyone all weekend raise their voice above the whirl of mixers and blenders.

GARY FARRELL: I think competitions are very important to young chefs important to chefs in general. It teaches you certain things that you don't necessarily learn in the kitchen. Obviously working under pressure, working with a team, small group of people, limited time, limited resource, so, you know, you've got to get in, you've got to do what you've got to do, hopefully you will come up, using the skill set, using what you've learnt.

GEORGE CALOMBARIS: Ecumee: foam of broccoli

DAVID TOHTIEN GUAN: To me, it is very important as I say, for a chef, whatever you've been learning, you've been doing in your hotel, you don't really know what the outside world is about. So as I say, it is a very good experience. Gain experience, knowledge, exchange of information, exchange of cuisine.

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: We've got a fantastic team out here today as well. The guys obviously need to be very passionate about this. There's a lot of hours going into it. A day, 16-18 hours of hard work going through, not only for this, but for the operation where your original employer is still there. There is a lot of work going into it. You need the commitment to it. Then the passion again and then some experience. The best way to start off is just local competitions, do local salon culinaires, do local competitions which we are quite active in in Dubai over the last four years and get experience out of there and then just get further into international results.

PETER LEWIS: Coming into this competition, reputations didn't come much bigger than the wraps on the team from the Burj Al Arab, the 7-star pub in Dubai regarded even by world-weary travellers as the 8th wonder of the world. Their own spin doctors struggle for superlatives.

TV AD: No ordinary language can describe the dining experience of Burj Al Arab.

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: It's just something unique, something one and only. It is a great place. It's just, you've got such high standards in general which are getting provided to the customers, which pay a lot of money.

PETER LEWIS: As you say, everybody expects well above average. Does that put a lot of pressure on the kitchen staff to come up with something special every night - each and every night?

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: I think it's pressure, yes, but I think it's the passion only you have in the kitchen staff in general. I think the brigade is quite big, which counts at 180 chefs currently. The pressure by itself is quite - you get used to it and you start loving pressure.

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: I think it's pressure, yes, but I think it's the passion only you have in the kitchen staff in general. I think the brigade is quite big, which counts at 180 chefs currently. The pressure by itself is quite - you get used to it and you start loving pressure.

PETER LEWIS: His team faced a formidable challenge from 15 others drawn from some of the best known hotels and restaurants across Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

TIM KELPH: What I would like to do just before we - first off, welcome, and now what I would like to do is introduce you to the other people, the sponsors and some of the judges who are involved in this event.

PETER LEWIS: The Black Box Culinary Challenge was an idea conceived 10 years ago by Meat and Livestock Australia's regional manager in Asia, Tim Kelph, as a way of showcasing the best red meat we produce to the most fastidious end of the food chain.

ALAN PALMER: To be very clear again, you will get soon your boxes. There are three boxes coming in which are wrapped in black covers.

PETER LEWIS: Stirring the pot, as it were, at the inaugural event and every one since was challenge convenor, Alan Palmer.

ALAN PALMER: All of those ingredients in those boxes have to be used in your menu. Must, OK? Must be used.

PETER LEWIS: With the pleasantries over, it was time to unveil the secret ingredients contained within the black box.

ALAN PALMER: OK, drop it, OK.

PETER LEWIS: Queensland Stockyard Beef supplied long-fed beef striploins for the main course, alongside boneless lamb blades from Sydney-based Mulwarra Exports. Apart from the seafood, supplied by a long-time Norwegian supporter of this concept, everything else was home-grown - from fruit and vegetables, the dairy products and spices, through to wine from Lucindale in South Australia. And the teams were warned that the judges and the Australian Quarantine Service would take a dim view of anyone slipping in secret herbs and spices they had brought with them from home.

ALAN PALMER: Do you need any more clarification? Do you need any more clarification?

COMPETITOR: No, I think we're right.

PETER LEWIS: They had one hour to rifle through their black box and work out a four-course menu to feed 40. This is the first time MLA has brought the Black Box Challenge home and it's the first time Australia has entered the fray. The local hope is resting on Gary Farrell and his team from Melbourne's RACV Club.

GARY FARRELL: Look, we sat down as a group. We had a look at what we had to use, had a look at what support ingredients that we could use. And I suppose at the end of it, we worked out and we thought our menus are a little bit different and hopefully they're going to get us over the line.

ALAN PALMER: Here is your cos here. Hello! Baby cos, beautiful.

PETER LEWIS: The team from Raffles Hotel in Singapore was frankly surprised there wasn't a little more Aussie flavour to the black box.

DAVID TOH TIEN GUAN: It makes me make a little more time to make combination of the items, before I can really come up with a proper menu, things like that.

PETER LEWIS: As for the boys from the Burj Al Arab, well, they were as cool as a cucumber.

CHRISTIAN GRADNITZER: The most important thing is stay calm. Stay calm, relaxed, controlled and don't take the pressure straight on you.

ALAN PALMER: Merci beaucoup sir, merci beaucoup. OK, that's it. We have all the teams. Now have all the teams lodged their menus?

PETER LEWIS: Precisely 24 hours after they got their ingredients they plate it up for the judges, who gave a whole new meaning to fast food as they swept from kitchen to kitchen, sampling 16 appetisers, 16 soups and 16 mains. The judges would allocate 10 per cent of the marks for how well organised and efficient each kitchen was maintained, 20 per cent for the creativity of the dishes and the use of all the ingredients, 20 per cent for how well they're cooked and 50 per cent for how it all tastes.

PETER LEWIS: And can you pick up much from the judges as they sweep past?

GEORGE CALOMBARIS: No, no, they are all, I think...

PETER LEWIS: Inscrutable.

GEORGE CALOMBARIS: Yeah, exactly, inscrutable. But yeah, it looks like they've been enjoying it. You could see a few eyes flicker, so that's good to see.

